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REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR
CONSULTATION WITH
NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
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GENERAL REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR CONSULTATIONS WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Statement submitted by the World Federation of United Nations Associations, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, category I

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 23 and 24 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

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1. The members of the Conference of NGOs (CONGO) look forward to working with the Open-Ended Working Group to assess the methods through which the community of non-governmental organizations may most effectively contribute to the deliberations of United Nations governmental groups. There are many ways in which various United Nations bodies relate to non-governmental organizations, including the wide array of sustainable development and humanitarian assistance activities. NGOs also have a long history of supporting the United Nations information services both within their own constituencies and to wider audiences.

2. Today we are exploring the unique system established by the Economic and Social Council to include non-governmental organizations as participants in the ongoing efforts to develop policies designed to further the well-being of the

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people of the world. The role of NGOs as observers and contributors to the debates which have continued during the past 45 years is the issue before us. Has it been helpful, constructive, innovative? The answer surely is "yes" more often than not.

3. When the representatives of international NGOs offer views in the debates they are speaking of positions which cut across many geographic boundaries. The large NGOs - many of which have status in category I - not only include substantial numbers of members but also arrive at policy positions through a consensus-building process. Thus a valuable consensus view is added to those expressed by individual countries. Other NGOs may add the collective expertise of members with a common profession or dedication.

4. International NGOs are the counterpart to the United Nations, indeed many of them antedate the United Nations by decades. They were in the forefront of demonstrating the value to human welfare of international cooperation and the exchange of knowledge and experience among a diversity of groups. It is this experience which is made available to the intergovernmental bodies as they seek to build firmer institutions.

5. We must recognize that coalitions which cross national boundaries are still developing entities - whether governmental or non-governmental. It is important that we mutually reinforce the institutions that are being built so laboriously. Working together on the many issues which confront us can strengthen the bonds among Governments and within the international NGOs.

6. This is a part of the reciprocal commitment inherent in the system outlined in Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV): the United Nations provides access to the policy makers and in return receives advice, criticism and proposals for needed action. It can be shown that many United Nations programmes arise from concerns formulated by NGOs - among others, the steady deterioration of the global environment was demonstrated by several groups whose advocacy persuaded Governments to convene the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972.

7. Aside from the dramatic occasion of a global conference, there are other results of NGO initiatives, such as constructive assistance programmes or a convention against torture or one on the rights of the child. Because NGOs have a commitment to the United Nations through the system of consultative status, they not only provide the stimulus to move forward but they also assist in the implementation of decisions, whether it is to disseminate information, to encourage further participation or to organize field projects.

8. To revert to the system under Council resolution 1296 (XLIV). A key to its success is the opportunity it permits for NGO representation, as observers, in the continuing process of policy development. NGO representatives become sensitive to the concerns of the Governments, identify the delegates who are the players, and learn how to intervene most effectively - it may be formally through circulated documents or oral statements, or it may be informally. In either case, it is essential that the NGO representatives have access to the sessions of the various bodies and to documentation in time.

9. In recent years the number of members of the United Nations has more than tripled. There is no universal count of the number of NGOs that came into being during this period, but we are all aware that it has been very substantial as people in all countries have come together to solve their problems or to support each other in a variety of tasks.

10. How can this human dynamo be brought into an effective partnership with the intergovernmental system established by the Charter of the United Nations? We believe that the system devised in the early years is valid, should be preserved, modified if necessary and expanded to include all the bodies of the United Nations. Both partners must consider how they can best use and implement the system. Governments can help by indicating what activities they have found useful and by working on establishing processes which facilitate NGO participation. The NGOs must look at the growing number of organizations of all kinds and think about bringing them together under different umbrellas and recognize that new styles of organization are possible in this era of modern communications.

11. Perhaps the question is how to bring flexibility into an ongoing firm reciprocal commitment. NGOs identified as representative of important constituencies and that are prepared to work consistently on issues where they can make contributions should have a permanent status. They can be called upon for advice throughout the process of developing positions and they can in turn alert the intergovernmental bodies to emerging problems and issues. Meanwhile other devices such as the hearings recently convened on the Agenda for Development could bring in a wider range of views - representatives of networks and caucuses, as well as academic specialists, could be brought into these ad hoc events. An especially interesting aspect of hearings is the opportunity they offer for some real dialogue among the participants. Perhaps more of this could take place in the formal sessions of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council.

12. As more groups seek to enter the international arena two forces inevitably come into play. One is the great diversity among NGOs - each is established for some purpose dear to the hearts of its members - which requires some degree of individual autonomy and maintenance of individual rights for NGOs. The other is the need to encourage more cooperation and coalition-building. There are many examples of this in practice. The Conference of NGOs has for many years formed committees around major issues, such as human rights, status of women, human settlements, substance abuse, ageing and the family, for the purpose of sharing information and of identifying common positions.

13. The activity in recent years around major conferences has led to the formation of voluntary caucuses based on geographic regions or various relevant issues. The Council might consider a more systematic arrangement to permit representatives of these groups to make presentations at appropriate moments. It must always be understood that spokespersons can speak only for those who choose to subscribe to the views that are expressed. In the interest of ensuring the submission of innovative ideas we must resist the temptation to find a lowest common denominator of consensus among the largest number of people.

Conferences

14. The conferences of the past 20 years have played a significant role in generating NGO interest in the work of the United Nations. It is, of course, a purpose of these conferences to focus global attention on different aspects of development: environment, population, habitat, transfer of science and technology and women's participation among others. Efforts are made to have all Governments, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and the media actively engage in the preparations for conferences and support the results. Following the excitement of reaching a global consensus the hard work of implementing it takes place at the local level among the people most concerned. The enthusiasm generated must be translated into programmes and projects on the ground.

15. The Review Working Group should make a distinction between the arrangements made for encouraging and facilitating NGO participation in the conference process and those made for continuing participation in the work of the functional commissions and other bodies of the Council. The current arrangements, outlined in a series of resolutions for recent conferences, have the merit of opening the process to all organizations which demonstrate their legitimacy, interest and relevance while retaining the concept that NGOs with consultative status have a commitment to contribute to a major United Nations issue. On the other hand, Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) remains a viable base for implementing a continuing relationship with international NGOs.

Other United Nations bodies

16. For many years disarmament has been a prime issue for many of the NGOs related to the Council. The NGO committees working in this field have been among the most active. Today, as the United Nations seeks new approaches to peacé-keeping and peacemaking, NGOs are cooperating in many ventures. They should be encouraged to participate in policy development so that their subsequent actions can be most effective. Their role in conferences is well established, whether it is an Economic and Social Council or General Assembly enterprise. This review may be able to recommend elements of the consultative system which should be applied to other General Assembly bodies.

Consistency

17. It is becoming imperative that some standard and consistent arrangements be in place for the NGOs. Far too much time is spent by representatives seeking clarification about where, when and how they may participate. This applies to the work of the Council and its constituent bodies as well as to the ad hoc conferences.

18. Another important point that must be considered is the internal United Nations structure to ensure effective functioning of the NGO system. This requires a more consistent flow of information, access to documents in time to bring considered views to the table and access to United Nations buildings and meeting rooms.

19. In the light of the expanding role of NGOs, the central Secretariat should be placed in a position to relate to all relevant secretariats - perhaps in the Secretary-General's office as previously proposed. The decentralization of daily work with NGOs as groups or constituencies are identified may be a subject for this review. However, as different secretariat units develop relations with groups of NGOs it is important that there be consistent coordination among them.

20. We look forward to working with the members of this Working Group to enhance the system of United Nations/NGO relationships and to permit it to flourish during the coming decades.